



Testimony Regarding

HB 5037, An Act Adjusting the State Budget for the Biennium Ending June 30, 2023 Department of Social Services Budget

Appropriations Committee February 23, 2022

Good evening Senators Osten, Kushner & Cicarella, Representatives Walker, Abercrombie & Betts, and members of the Committee. The Domestic Violence Crisis Center (DVCC) provides life-saving services to victims of domestic violence in Stamford, Norwalk, Westport, Darien, New Canaan, Wilton, and Weston. Services include counseling, support groups, safety planning, court-based advocacy, transportation, assistance with securing basic needs and job training, and coordination with local law enforcement, among others.

One-time CSFRF Allocation to Address Victims' Safety Risks & Needs - \$2,900,000

We thank Governor Lamont for his proposal to allocate \$2,900,000 in FY23 from the Coronavirus State Fiscal Recovery Fund (CSFRF) to the Department of Social Services (DSS) to address victims' safety risks and needs, which have been intensified by the pandemic, and urge your support. This funding will assist CT Coalition Against Domestic Violence's (CCADV) 18 member organizations, including DVCC with providing critical assistance to victims including sheltering/hoteling, food, transportation costs, basic needs, childcare assistance, housing, moving, utilities, and furniture assistance.

Throughout the pandemic we have seen an increase in the complexity of issues facing survivors and financial support for direct client emergency needs, like those listed above, is a common request from survivors struggling to achieve financial independence from their abusers during the pandemic.

Upon arrival at DVCC's safe house, a mother of two children (ages 6 and 12) worked with advocates to establish short- and long-term goals including finding permanent housing. Although she was employed full-time, the client was struggling to find an affordable apartment due to inadequate income, no child support from the children's father, and what was later

DVCC's mission is to provide effective services, support and education for the prevention and elimination of domestic violence across the Connecticut communities of Stamford, Norwalk, Darien, New Canaan, Weston, Westport, Wilton, and beyond.

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discovered to be damaged credit history. As she applied for housing, her rental applications were repeatedly denied. When she and the advocate checked her credit report, they discovered the unpaid debt had gone to collections and damaged her credit score.

This client was eligible for Permanent Supportive Housing for herself and her children because of a mental health diagnosis. She was matched with an available unit in December. However, she did not have the funds to cover the security deposit so the advocate helped her apply for Rapid Exit Funding which was granted, enabling the client to secure the unit. The timing of this was fortunate because these units are in very short supply. During the time she was planning her move, from November to December, the client was in an automobile accident and the money she had been saving to purchase furniture from The Make A Home Foundation, had to go toward the car repair. The car was her means to get to her job so this became her top priority and wiped out her savings. The advocate submitted a request from DVCC's Brave Wings Emergency Fund to cover the cost of the second-hand furniture and its delivery through Make A Home.

This allocation of one-time pandemic relief funding will allow our service system to provide much needed emergency assistance to survivors struggling to achieve financial independence from their abusers during the pandemic.

In addition to the emergency financial needs of survivors, this funding will assist with the ongoing emergency housing needs of survivors fleeing their abusive homes. For years Connecticut's domestic violence shelters have functioned well-above capacity with an average utilization rate of 122% between fiscal years 2016 and 2020, meaning shelters were overflowing year-round. But with the pandemic, shelter utilization has seen a sharp increase and the cost has skyrocketed due to the need to rely more heavily on the use of hoteling to properly social distance existing shelter space.

Last fiscal year (2020-2021) DVCC's cost to provide client hoteling/lodging was \$26,000. In addition, we provided more than \$34,000 in food and gas assistance for clients.

To date, we have received various pandemic relief funds through both DSS and the U.S. Department of Health & Human Services, as well as having the opportunity to leverage private philanthropic dollars. However, we anticipate that hoteling will continue as a significant cost through FY23. Additional one-time CSFRF will be critical to addressing the ongoing emergency shelter and emergency financial needs of survivors.

Annual Funding to Support Domestic Violence Child & Family Advocates - \$1,440,000

In addition to supporting the Governor's proposal for use of CSFRF to assist survivors, we're calling on the General Assembly to allocate annual funding in the amount of \$1,440,000 to fund 18 domestic violence child & family advocates across the state at CCADV's member organizations, including two here at DVCC (Stamford and Norwalk are counted as two member sites), Connecticut currently does not provide any state funding to support this critical role within the domestic violence service system.

As the pandemic has stretched on longer than any of us originally anticipated, the secondary effects of this global crisis continue to play out in communities and homes across Connecticut. Much attention has rightfully been paid to the impact of the pandemic on the mental health and social-emotional development of children. This concern is only heightened for those children who, on top of dealing with pandemic isolation, have been experiencing domestic violence in their homes.

The pandemic has had serious negative consequences for children living with domestic violence. Increased rates of anxiety and depression, incidents of self-harm and substance abuse are among the challenges they are facing. Further, the education gap caused by a year of remote learning is even more pronounced among many of the children exposed to domestic violence during the pandemic. In addition to trying to learn in a volatile environment, many of the children we serve are from low-income families who were struggling to afford basic needs, some have language barriers, and many faced neglect as parents were either focused on trying to work or overwhelmed by their own trauma. During the pandemic, length-of-stay in our safe houses tripled. The children living there were experiencing the compounded trauma of domestic violence in addition to having fled their homes. Many were navigating online school and social pressures in this unfamiliar communal living environment. The Youth & Family Counselor provided essential clinical support for children and their parents during this critical time.

Experiencing trauma often overwhelms a child's usual coping skills. Children can experience difficulty regulating emotions and behavior due to trauma. DVCC's Youth & Family counselor works with children to develop age-appropriate and child-specific responses to trauma and violence. Moreover, this work is making strides in breaking generational cycles of abuse for the future. In FY2021, as a result of DVCC's child counseling, 100% of child clients had an age-appropriate understanding of domestic violence dynamics (ex., Violence is never okay, and fighting between adults is not my fault). In addition, 80% of parents reported seeing positive changes in their child's coping skills since they started counseling at DVCC.

Currently, federal pass-through funds in the amount of \$11,500 support only about a quarter of the cost of a full-time advocate. For DVCC, that means that we have to rely on private grants, and do our own fundraising to support the cost of this position. At DVCC we have four sites, our Norwalk and Stamford offices and our two safe houses. This one employee splits her time between all four sites. In the end, even with our efforts to cobble together the position of child & family advocate, we know that we aren't able to truly dedicate the time we need to fully meet the needs of all children experiencing domestic violence in Stamford, Norwalk, Westport, Darien, New Canaan, Wilton, and Weston.

As we begin to come out of the pandemic, we are concerned that there will be a large influx of children presenting with significant need to various systems, including the domestic violence service system. We must be prepared to meet the needs of these most vulnerable victims. Adequate state funding is needed to properly support a full-time advocate at each of the state's 18 domestic violence organizations, including DVCC's two sites. For a small amount of annual funding (less than 0.01% of the overall state budget), we can make a big impact on kids.

Thank you for your consideration.